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ABSTRACT

One way of meeting the goals of the English composition course, both humanistic and pragmatic, is through a combination of individualized instruction and focus on selected aspects of linguistics. Individualized instruction, using in-class tutors and writing notebooks, allows for a variety of activities that make better use of the scheduled class hours by giving students time to write, to discuss their writing with others, and to work in groups on such things as literature research. A firm understanding of American dialects, including edited American English, is important for all students and can be achieved in a number of ways, using aspects of linguistics and applied linguistics. (JM)

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THE BASICS OF COMPOSITION: DIALECTS AND INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

William L. Sipple

"Language is the most human, the most basic of all of man's activities and accomplishments. . . . As we study language, we become increasingly aware of the broad resources that every speaker of every language possesses" (Owen Thomas, Transformational Grammar and the Teacher of English).[1]

The goals of the English composition course are both humanistic and pragmatic. The very humanness of language justifies its study. Also important, though, the study of language helps the student become more self-confident in his own ability to use language in a variety of written and spoken contexts, as well as developing in him an appreciation and a respect for the ability of other people to use language effectively. Without these requisites communication cannot take place. In studying language in the college composition course the student should become familiar with the variety and range of American dialects and should realize that the traditional "standard of correctness" is an artificial concept because no one dialect is "more correct" than any other, including "standard English" (edited American English --EAE). EAE is merely one dialect of English that is appropriate for some

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contexts and inappropriate for others; it usually connotes that the user is educated.

Too frequently, however, we must attempt to reach these goals in less than ideal situations. Many of us are confronted with increasingly larger composition sections despite national guidelines and wavering enrollments. Often we have multiple sections of comp which means hundreds of papers to read during the semester. Our syllabus often includes an introduction to fiction, drama, poetry, and research techniques, besides the expectation of turning out self-confident, thinking individuals who can express themselves intelligently in spoken and written language. Clearly no easy job, if we take it seriously.

In response to these goals and problems I would like to offer a few general concepts that, as a teacher of composition and not as a professional linguist, I have found useful as a basis for structuring English composition classes. The combination of individualized instruction and selected aspects of linguistics can help meet the needs of our students. The use of in-class tutors and writing notebooks work well with a study of the range of American dialects in a class aimed at improving language ability. I do not intend to outline an English composition course, but rather present a basis for operation with a few specific ideas that might be adapted for your own specific needs. My experimentation during the last two years has met encouraging success.

First of all, two means of effecting individualized instruction, the use of in-class tutors and writing notebooks, help to determine and respond to the specific needs of each student in the comp class. Individualizing instruction allows for a variety of activities that make better use of the scheduled class hours by giving students time to write, time to discuss their writing with others, and opportunities to work in groups on various other aspects of the

English course, literature or research for example. Able upper-class students who work as tutors with the comp students on a regular basis in the scheduled class hours of the comp section insure that students receive constant feedback on their writing. Every student's writing is read by either a tutor or the instructor at almost every session. The writing process becomes one of consistent rethinking and rewriting during the activity of writing, rather than only after the completion of the creative process as is the case with the conventional method of writing and submitting papers for evaluation and comments. The writing situation, then, becomes an ongoing process of communicating to a real audience. The tutor serves as a sounding board for ideas; he is someone who can probe the student's thinking, help shape fuzzy ideas, and respond to the effectiveness of the student's communication. The use of in-class tutors can significantly speed up the development of writing ability--the feedback during the writing process makes the difference.

The use of in-class tutors developed from a need to reach more students more frequently. Studies by William J. Dusel (1955)[2] and Edwin H. Sauer (1962)[3] show that the use of lay readers in the English class allows the instructor to function more effectively in the learning situation. The tutors that I have employed are drawn from my Linguistics class or Methods of Teaching English class, or from the ranks of English and Education majors. Some are paid when we can manage a pittance from the department budget; others are content to work for the practical experience. At the beginning of each semester the tutors are briefed in the essentials of their function: to encourage the comp student to think, develop, and organize his ideas; to discuss difficult and unclear ideas with the student; to ask key questions that might provoke more in-depth thinking; to analyze the student's writing and show him

where he can say more, give more examples, be more interesting. In short, much of the tutor's work revolves around the question, "Is the writer saying what he intends to say in the most effective and interesting way possible?" More in-depth training of the tutors continues through the semester, especially if they have not had Linguistics or Methods of Teaching English. Theone Hughes' Zero-In[4] program and David Holbrook's Children's Writing[5] are useful in shaping the tutor's attitudes toward student writing.

The second means of individualizing comp instruction, the use of writing notebooks, has certain advantages over assigning a series of individual papers. At the beginning of each semester the comp student is instructed to keep a loose-leaf notebook of all his writing for the course. Besides working on assigned topics and projects, the student should also include in the notebook any writing of his own choosing (for example, poetry, stories, letters, papers from other classes). The notebook should contain the drafts as well as the finished product, all assembled in order of development. Ultimately, the student will begin to see how to rewrite and expand ideas, and how several drafts of a paper will lead to a more effective finished product. The student is encouraged to write constantly. Whenever a paper is completed, he should begin another. Grades are not assigned to individual papers, but rather comments are made for revision,if necessary. With the help of the tutors and the instructor, the student works on each paper until it receives an "Ok." Periodically, or at the student's request, the notebook is graded on the basis of all its contents. A separate evaluation-recommendation sheet is prepared for each student and a letter grade is assigned. Gradually, students begin to enjoy writing--they know that what they write can be revised, that they will receive help with it, and that they will not be graded until they are satisfied with their work. The notebook also allows for a variety of kinds of

writing. Too often we stress only analytic writing (critical papers and reports) and neglect the more speculative modes (fiction, poetry, drama, conversations). And finally, the notebook provides a basis for analyzing the various dialects of American English.

The most "individual" and "basic" element in the comp class is the student's own language, the idiolect and dialect that identifies him as an individual and relates him to a specific social and cultural heritage. The CCCC policy statement, "Students' Right to Their Own Language,"[6] stresses the importance of this: "Since dialect is not separate from culture, but an intrinsic part of it, accepting a new dialect means accepting a new culture; rejecting one's native dialect is to some extend a rejection of one's culture" ("Students' Right to Their Own Language," p. 6). Within the framework of an individualized composition class, students can increase their awareness of and appreciation for the many varieties of American English, as well as explore their social, political, and ethical ramifications. A primary goal of the comp class is to make the student proficient in the use of language, including the dialect of edited American English. We cannot let the emotional arguments over the student's right to his own dialect cloud the issue. More basically, the student has the right to choose dialects for the situations he becomes a part of; all of <u>us</u> have that ability. We owe the development of this ability, or at least the awareness for developing this ability, to our students. As linguists have explained, we all possess the capacity to become multi-dialectal.[7] In the comp class we need to structure activities that explore the cultural and linguistic features of various dialects, showing none to be more "correct" than others. As one dialect of American English, then, EAE becomes not the norm, but rather a type of language that is appropriate for some contexts and not for others.

A firm understanding of American dialects, as part of the activity of the composition class, can be achieved in a number of ways using several aspects of linguistics and applied linguistics. Students need to know how language works, what transpires in various language situations, and how to control and direct their own use of language. A knowledge of deep structure (generally, what a sentence means) and surface structure (the features of the finished sentence) in language can be used as a basis for activities that lead to these goals. Showing that one concept or idea can take various surface shapes heightens awareness of language differences. Individual or group activities, such as writing directions for a simple process (tieing a shoe, making a paper airplane, opening a can with a manual can opener, etc.), describing a picture, or giving an account of an accident, illustrate the various ways the same thing can be expressed in different language structures. A second part to these exercises might be to rewrite the same exercise for specific audiences, for example a grandparent, a best friend, a seven-year old. Students will begin to see how they change various features of their language to suit the audience and the situation, as well as observing how others adapt language. Comparisons of various exercises on the same topic will point out the range of language differences in the class and will provide a foundation for noting dialectal differences. As the students experiment with language and compile the results in their notebooks, they will gradually assemble their personal text of language samples. The individual notebooks become one source book for comparing and contrasting the grammatical and usage features of the dialects of American English. Other activities that might fit in here could be drawn from works like S. I. Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action[8] or William Sparke's and Beatrice Taines' Doublespeak: Language For Sale.[9]

As the students assemble various samples of language in use, other dis-

tinctions should be made so that dialectal differences will become more apparent. Grammar should be differentiated from usage. Grammar is "a description of the system by which language conveys meanings beyond the sum of the meanings of the individual words. It includes phonology, morphology, and syntax" (Students' Right to Their Own Language," p. 17). Usage refers to the range of language contexts or situations. Using the student samples of language, besides those supplied by literature and other sources, we can cite grammatical differences in various dialects. For example, the changes in the surface features of the following sentences are grammatical:

he's workin' (means he is working now--Appalachian Mountain dialect)
he's a-workin' (means he is working for an indefinite time)
he is working (EAE written form)
he workin' (means he is working right now--Black English Vernacular)
he be workin' (means he is habitually working--BEV)[10]

Thus, sound differences (phonology), differences in the use of inflectional morphemes (i. e., plural markers, possessive markers, agreement on singular third person present tense verbs, etc.), and changes in syntax are the kinds of grammatical features that distinguish among various regional and ethnic dialects. Usage features, on the other hand, might be studies within the framework of levels of usage as provided by Martin Joos in The Five Clocks.[11] Joos describes five kinds of situations in which language is varied to fit the occasion. The levels range from intimate, casual, and consultative to formal and frozen. Language changes are made on each level according to the kinds of assumptions that the speaker-writer makes about his listener-reader. Students in the composition class might heighten awareness of these distinctions by examining samples of regional and ethnic dialects, creating characters and writing dialect conversations appropriate to various levels of usage, conducting and writing interviews, and by writing stories and plays,

as well as formal papers. With these writing activities the student can appreciate how communication takes place in a range of contexts and in a variety of dialects, including the dialect of EAE.

My final comments pertain to teaching the EAE dialect. The student's writing notebook again serves as a basis for distinguishing the features of this dialect from the grammatical and usage features of other dialects. With the help of the in-class tutors, the student's formal compositions can be compared and contrasted with the informal papers, stories, poetry, interviews and dramas so that specific areas of difficulty in the EAE dialect can be isolated. Individualized practice exercises can then be developed to address these areas. Several recent research studies, which set some guidelines for these exercises, show that lessons in grammar are counterproductive to increasing writing ability. Note that the authors of Research in Written Composition (1963)[12] conclude that "the teaching of formal grammar has negligible or . . . even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (pp. 37-38). And the experiments of Kellogg Hunt (1965),[13] John C. Mellon (1969),[14] and Frank O'Hare (1973)[15] reveal that structural sentence-combining exercises can increase writing proficiency. Moreover, William Strong comments in a recent article that "sentence-combining exercises are best regarded as a skill-building adjunct to a writing program. . . . There's a very good chance that sentence-combining may help you teach both the human and transcribing basics more effectively; and there's a pretty good chance that the exercises may take you into some other dimensions called syntactic maturity and cognitive development."[16]

In the composition class, then, sentence-combining exercises, only one kind of individualized grammatical exercise that could be used, can help students acquire the features of EAE and avoid such problems as unintentional

sentence fragments, run-on sentences and comma splices. Exercises directed to these specific ends can be developed from the plan presented by Charles R. Cooper in "An Outline for Writing Sentence-Combining Problems."[17] Other writing activities might employ various aspects of traditional, structural, and transformational-generative grammars to address the most frequent problems students encounter in writing EAE dialect.

Individualized instruction in the composition class, then, allows us to really meet the needs of each student, while an emphasis on dialects draws on and enlarges the language resources of each student. What I have suggested are only a few ways that language fluency and writing ability might be increased. It remains our job to continue probing educational methodology and contemporary linguistics for other means to these ends.

NOTES

[1](New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 208.

[2]"Determining an Efficient Teaching Load in English," Illinois English Bulletin, 43 (1955), 1-19.

[3]Contract Correcting: The Use of Lay Readers in the High School Composition Program. Report to the Cooperative Research Program of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1962. Unpaged.

[4]Prepared under the auspices of the Linguistics Committee of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, 1971; available through NCTE.

[5](Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Even though college level writing does not come under the purview of Holbrook's text, it remains a valuable exercise book for developing a humane attitude toward student writing.

[6]College Composition and Communication, 25 (1974), 1-32. All page references are cited in the text of the paper.

[7]For example, the work of Owen Thomas, William Labov, and others substantiates this. For a summary of attitudes toward teaching standard dialect (EAE), see David E. Eskey, "The Case for Standard Language," College English, 35 (1974), 769-74.

[8](New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972. 3rd edition).

[9](New York: Harper's College Press, 1975).

[10]See William A. Stewart, "Language Teaching Problems in Appalachia," The Florida FL Reporter (Special Anthology Issue, Spring/Summer, 1969), 7 (North Miami Beach: Florida FL Reporter, 1969), p. 59; and Jean Malmstrom, "Dialects--Updated," The Florida FL Reporter, same issue, p. 49.

[11](New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961).

[12]Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1963).

[13]Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1965).

[14]Transformational Sentence Combining, A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1969).

[15]Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1973).

[16]"Back to Basics and Beyond," English Journal, 65 (1976), p. 64.

[17]English Journal, 62 (1973), 96-102.